DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 304 650 CG 021 525

AUTHOR Krivacska, James J.
TITLE School Psychologists and Evaluation of Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Programs.
PUB DATE Aug 88
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (96th, Atlanta, GA, August 12-16, 1988).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Abuse; Elementary School Students; Elementary Secondary Education; *Prevention; *Program Effectiveness; *School Psychologists; *Sexual Abuse

ABSTRACT

With heightened national attention to the problem of child sexual abuse, school districts have responded by seeking out and implementing prevention programs in an attempt to prevent abuse from occurring. Unfortunately, many such programs are based on questionable assumptions, limited understanding of how children learn and process information, and have not been empirically validated. The school psychologist with a background in child development, learning theory, psychological and educational theory and research, and an understanding of issues of program design, implementation and evaluation, is uniquely qualified to assist school districts in the selection and evaluation of child sexual abuse programs. Criteria developed for the evaluation of child sexual abuse programs cover assumptions, goals and purposes, content, presentation or implementation, and follow-up. Child sexual abuse programs must still be considered as experimental and not viewed as benign intrusions into a child's life. The limited effectiveness of child sexual abuse prevention programs needs to be recognized and a view that they serve as a panacea for preventing child sexual abuse is to be discouraged. As the research base grows, school psychologists are in an ideal position to assist decision makers in the public schools in interpreting and understanding the implications of what is being learned about child sexual abuse prevention programs, their limitations, and how they may be useful. (ABL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED304650

School Psychologists and Evaluation of Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Programs

James J. Krivacska, Psy.D.
Educational Program Consultants, Milltown, N.J.

Poster Session
American Psychological Association Convention
Atlanta, Georgia
August, 1988

CG 021525

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
James J. Krivacska
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

School Psychologists and Evaluation of

Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Programs

James J. Krivacska, Psy.D.

With heightened national attention to the problem of Child Sexual Abuse, school districts have responded by seeking out and implementing programs in an attempt to prevent abuse from occurring. Thus, Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Programs (CSAP) have proliferated. Unfortunately, many such programs are based on questionable assumptions, limited understanding of how children learn and process information, and have not been empirically validated. The school psychologist with a background in child development, learning theory, psychological and educational theory and research, and an understanding of issues of program design, implementation and evaluation, is uniquely qualified to assist school districts in the selection and evaluation of CSAP programs. This paper discussed issues involved in the evaluation of CSAP programs and the role of the school psychologist. Specifically, evaluative criteria covering program assumptions, goals and purposes, content, presentation or implementation, and follow-up were presented and discussed.

School Psychologists and Evaluation of Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Programs

James J. Krivacska, Psy.D.

INTRODUCTION

Increased awareness over the past 10 years that the prevalence of child sexual abuse was much higher than previously thought and indications that significant numbers of children were at risk for being exposed to sexual abuse, has led to efforts to first identify current victims, and second to prevent abuse from occurring in the future. Such efforts have included attempts at increasing public awareness of the problem through the media, legislation increasing the penalties for abusers, and changes in court proceedings making convictions easier to obtain.

Approximately ten years ago, the first attempt was made to educate children directly about abuse and teach them how to defend themselves against the sexually abusive actions of adults (Plummer, 1986). Like the many programs which followed, this initial effort sought to present information about sexual abuse to children in a manner which was informative, at the target child's developmental level, and non-threatening. Additionally, many of these programs attempted to teach children the signs of sexually abusive behavior and specific actions they may take to protect themselves in sexually abusive situations.

Despite the lack of clear evidence for their effectiveness (Conte, Rosen, Saperstein, & Shermack, 1985; Conte, 1986; Hazzard & Angert, 1986; Wolfe, MacPherson, Blount, & Wolfe, 1986) and some emerging evidence that, in some forms, such programs may be harmful (Garbarino, 1986; Herndon, 1984; Kleemeier & Webb, 1986; Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 1986; Swan, Press, & Briggs, 1985), CSAP programs have proliferated and are estimated to have reached over 1 million children (Plummer, 1986). School districts are faced with the difficult decision of which programs are appropriate and which are unsubstantiated in their effectiveness, a task which requires a knowledge of CSAP programs and research in education and psychology. Evaluation data available from publishers of such material are frequently of little value in such endeavors and tend to report consumer satisfaction results only.

School psychologists have extensive backgrounds in education and psychology and are in a unique position to assist school decision makers in selecting such programs and determining, once they are in place, whether or not they are effective. This paper summarizes information on CSAPs for school psychologists. Subsequent to a brief description of the types of programs currently available and their content, the existing research regarding the effectiveness of such programs will be briefly reviewed.

The remainder of this paper will discuss how to evaluate a program for the purpose of selection and includes:

1. assessment of program goals, purposes and assumptions;
2. review of appropriateness and accuracy of program content;
3. methods of presentation or implementation; and
4. provision for follow-up instruction and program evaluation.

A REVIEW OF CSAP PROGRAM CONTENT AND PRESENTATION

CSAP programs are designed to increase children's awareness and knowledge of child sexual abuse (often without providing any knowledge or education about sexuality) and to empower children to resist sexually abusive situations (Tharinger, Krivacska, Laye-McDonough, Jamison, Vincent, & Hedlund, 1988). Such programs frequently involve the presentation of one or more of the following concepts: (1). Body Ownership — that a child's body belongs to him/her and (s)he as the right to control access to his/her body; (2). Touch Continuum — that touch may be categorized into two types; good and bad -- some earlier versions included a third type - confused; (3). Secrecy — that secrets are things that you are never

supposed to tell anyone, are bad and should be told versus surprises which eventually are told; (4). Intuition — that children have an innate sense of what is appropriate and inappropriate touch and that children should "trust their feelings"; (5). Saying NO - that children should respond to abusing situations by saying no (some programs include the instruction to also run away and tell someone); and (6). Support Systems - that there are many different people the child can turn to for help (Conte, et al., 1985). Also frequently present is the concept that the child is not to blame for the abuse (Tharinger, et al, 1988). (See Krivacska, in press; Tharinger, et al, 1988; and Tharinger & Krivacska, 1988 for a discussion of the problems inherent in attempting to teach these concepts to children).

Programs may include one-shot, large group presentations or may involve curriculum based programs presenting information over a period of weeks. Media have included books, films, filmstrips, plays, puppet shows, comicbooks, etc. (Tharinger & Krivacska, 1988). The curriculum based programs tend to be presented by school personnel (classroom teacher, school nurse, etc.) while the one-shot presentations tend to be provided by outside groups.

CSAP PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

The wide variety of program designs and content makes evaluation difficult because of the difficulty of generalizing results from one program type to another. Findings obtained from an examination of the effectiveness of a filmstrip program focusing on incest with intermediate school aged children provide little help in deciding on the potential effectiveness of a workbook based program focusing on the touch continuum with little emphasis on incest directed at primary school-aged children.

Nevertheless, some preliminary observations can be made from a review of the evaluation research into CSAP effectiveness and essentially these results are not encouraging. Eliminating studies which are primarily consumer satisfaction type evaluations (eg. "Did you enjoy the program?" type questions), the results of program effectiveness evaluation show poor to moderate retention of program concepts presented. Conte, et al. (1985) reported knowledge gains of 28% to 50% among children exposed to a program; Wolfe, et al. (1986) reported a mean gain of 1 correct answer on a 7 item test; Kleemeier & Webb (using a well-controlled study with multiple outcome measures) found no significant increases in knowledge; Conte (1986) and Hazzard and Angert (1986) found that knowledge gains were not sustained over time.

Only one study to date has attempted measure a behavioral response to an abusive situation. Fryer, Krazier, and Miyoshi (1987) using confederates, exposed groups of children (some of whom received child abuse prevention programming and others who did not) to abduction situations and found that those exposed to the prevention program were more likely to correctly respond in the abduction situation. Aside from some ethical concerns regarding this approach, the meaning of the data obtained is in question given the authors' report that there also seemed to be a significant correlation between appropriate response to the abuse situation and levels of self-esteem suggesting that children with good self-esteem are more likely to benefit from prevention programming than children of low self-esteem (Fryer et al., 1987). Unfortunately, it is the child with poor self-esteem who is at greatest risk for being a victim of abuse (Finkelhor, 1986).

In summary, evaluation of CSAP programs suggests little empirical support for their effectiveness both in terms of their ability to demonstrate sustained increases in children's knowledge about abuse, and relative to an increase in defensive capabilities to be used when faced with abusive situations.

EVALUATION OF CSAP PROGRAM'S: THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST'S PERSPECTIVE

(1). Program Goal & Purpose. The first area to be reviewed is the program's overall goal and purpose, as well as the assumptions upon which it is based. Many programs state, as their explicit purpose, the prevention of sexual abuse of children as their primary goal (Anderson, 1986). As noted above, however, such a goal is difficult to measure as to its effectiveness, and to date, has acquired little empirical support. Additionally, some programs espouse the position that their primary purpose is to identify abused children. Although such an outcome is frequently a by-product of CSAP programs and is an appropriate secondary goal, a program which emphasizes identification will be mis-directed for the majority of children participating in the program since they are designed as prevention programs.

Furthermore, given the low frequency of disclosures of abuse resulting from CSAP program presentations as compared to current projections of incidence of abuse, this goal is

clearly not being met (Conte, et al., 1985). Thus, the majority of programs as they are currently designed are neither preventing sexual abuse, nor identifying children who are currently being abused.

Another frequently found assumption underlying CSAP programs is the belief that children can and should be empowered to prevent their own victimization. This assumption is a philosophical one, is drawn from the literature on women's rape and abuse, and has no basis for its emergence as a basic tenet of CSAP (Tharinger, et al, 1988). Such program foci run counter to currently held views of child development and children's developmental needs for security and safety and appear to place undue burden, particularly on younger children (preschool and primary grades). Programs which attempt to simplify complex human interactions into such vague and poorly defined constructs as empowerment, are likely to confuse children and lead to misinterpretation.

Absent from most CSAP programs is any discussion of sex or human sexuality. The assumption is that you may teach a child about sexual abuse without providing basic sex information, discussing the positive nature of most human sexuality, or even (in many programs) using correct biological terms for genitalia (Tharinger, et al, 1988). With regard to the avoidance of correct sexual terminology, (as an example) the result of using euphemisms for parts of the body may be to send conflicting and ambiguous message to children that impede the process of learning about sexual abuse.

CSAP programs should be based on reasonable assumptions, should recognize that sex education must precede sexual abuse education, must be reasonable in their expectations of the degree to which children can be expected to participate in their own protection, and not attempt to confuse identification with prevention as a program goal.

(2). Clarity of Presentation. Content areas need to be evaluated for their clarity in presenting program concepts, their age appropriateness and the degree to which the presentation is consistent with what is currently known about how children learn new concepts. The following critical questions need to be addressed:

a. *Does the program in question attempt to teach abstract concepts such as body ownership to early elementary or preschool children absent appropriate and consistent concrete examples?*

Most of the concepts discussed earlier as common to CSAP programs, require abstract levels of thought not available to young children. Additionally, many such concepts (particularly, body ownership, secrets and touch continuum) are inconsistently applied in a child's life (eg. children are not accorded exclusive ownership of body rights with respect to medical attention or hygiene).

Merrill & Tennyson (1977) have discussed in detail the process for instructing children in concepts. They stress the need for an operational definition of the concept which includes the specification of the critical and unique attributes that make up the concept and help to differentiate it from others. A program which does not attempt to provide such clarity is likely to confuse children.

b. *Does the program contain an appropriately balanced content which does not scare children and is geared to their developmental level (Wolfe, MacPherson, Blount & Wolfe, 1986)?*

Scare tactics applied in other prevention activities have been found to increase the target population's vulnerability to the target problem (Kleinot & Rogers, 1982). CSAP programs should not unduly frighten or scare children. Most importantly, such programs must repeatedly stress, that most adult/child interactions and contacts are appropriate, positive and to be enjoyed.

c. *Is the instruction consistent with the child's experiences?*

As noted before, many programs teach concepts which are inconsistent with reality, including the teaching of the difference between secrets and surprises (with an emphasis not to keep the former), and the right to control access to one's body (Conte, Rosen, Saperstein, & Shermack, 1985). Children are frequently required to keep secrets unrelated to sex abuse and often access to a child's body is more controlled by a parent than the child him/herself.

There is no evidence that focusing on these abstract and poorly defined concepts aids in the prevention of sexual abuse. Programs should focus on specific types of touch that may be

inappropriate without invoking vague concepts of body rights and secrecy.

d. *Does the program content include only what children need to know and not provide information which they cannot be reasonably expected to process?*

Some programs provide rather explicit and detailed descriptions and discussions of sexual abuse. Others place undue emphasis on familial abuse (incest) at early ages when a child's need for security is critical. Such programs are not responsive to children's developmental needs and should be avoided.

e. *Does the program include not only a presentation of appropriate responses to abusive situations but opportunities to practice the skills taught?*

Behavioral rehearsal may be critical to retention and provides children with additional opportunities to examine the concepts involved and their responses to it.

(3). Implementation Evaluation. Evaluation of how the program is to be presented and implemented is critical, due to research which shows that presenters frequently deviate from the program outlines (Conte, et al, 1986). The ease with which the curriculum can be mastered given the materials provided is an important consideration. The program should recognize the issue of unintended consequences, specifically attempt to isolate them and address them when discovered. The extent to which implementation of the system can be monitored as well as the degree to which modifications can be made to suit local needs, also impact on program suitability. Programs must also provide information for users regarding dealing with a variety of issues in the classroom ranging from embarrassment to revelations of abuse.

(4). Follow-up Instruction. Lastly, some recognition and provision for follow-up instruction is needed. Any program which does not provide materials or instruction for follow-up, presumes (incorrectly) that children can retain, process and understand a totally foreign concept without distortion or further need for discussion. Programs should systematically look for unintended consequences of the program upon the participating children.

Programs should also include some means of measuring their effectiveness, preferably measures that go beyond pre-post testing of children's knowledge gains. To that end several evaluation questions should be asked:

a. Does the outcome evaluation include valid and reliable measures of the target behavior?
b. Are the changes measured in the context of a control or comparison group?
c. Were the measures used appropriately?
d. Does the evaluation reflect the variables the program is supposed to effect?
e. How important are the obtained changes? (this question being independent of that of statistical difference; a result may be statistically significant, but for practical purposes, irrelevant).
f. Does the change endure across time?
g. Were multiple forms of assessment used to measure program effectiveness? (Cowen, 1984).

While many of these questions would appear to be of the type more typically the concern of the researcher than the field based practitioner, in the area of CSAP, all school psychologists are researchers because of the paucity of good evaluation research on CSAP effectiveness. Therefore, NO program can be considered validated, and each must be continually evaluated, revised and modified with the ultimate goal of either finding a program which is successful at preventing child sexual abuse, or abandoning the cause altogether because of a demonstrable inability to do so.

CONCLUSION

CSAP programs cannot be considered benign intrusions into a child's life and must still be viewed as experimental at this time (Conte, et al, 1986). The limited effectiveness of CSAP programs needs to be recognized and a view that they serve as a panacea for preventing child sexual abuse is to be discouraged. As the research base grows, school psychologists are in an ideal position to assist decision makers in the public schools interpret and understand the implications of what is being learned about CSAP programs, about their limitations and how they may be most useful. This paper hopefully provided a framework and knowledge base upon which school psychologists can build and assist local school systems understand the strengths and limitations of CSAP programs as they are implemented in schools and how to evaluate and select programs as well as evaluate their effectiveness.

REFERENCES

Anderson, C. (1986). The Touch Continuum: An Interview with Cordelia Anderson. In M. Nelson & K. Clark (Eds.). The Educator's Guide to Preventing Child Sexual Abuse. Santa Cruz, CA: Network Publications.

Conte, J. R., Rosen, C., Saperstein, L. & Shermack, R. (1985). Evaluation of a program to prevent the sexual victimization of young children. Child Abuse & Neglect, 9, 319-328.

Conte, J. R. (1986). Evaluating prevention education programs. In M. Nelson & K. Clark (Eds.). The Educator's Guide to Preventing Child Sexual Abuse (pg. 126-129). Santa Cruz, CA: Network Publications.

Cowen, E. (1984). General structural model for primary prevention program development for mental health. Personnel and Guidance Journal, 62(8), 485-490.

Finkelhor, D. (1984). Child Sexual Abuse, New Theory and Research. New York: Free Press.

Fryer, G. E., Krazier, S. K., & Miyoshi, T. (1987). Measuring actual reduction of risk to child abuse: A new approach. Child Abuse & Neglect, 11, 173-179.

Garbarino, J. (1986). Can we measure success in preventing child abuse? Issues in policy, programming and research. Child Abuse & Neglect, 10, 143-156.

Hazzard, A., & Angert, L. (1986). Child sexual abuse prevention: Previous research and future direction. Paper presented at the American Psychological Association Convention, Washington, D.C.

Herndon, M. (1984). Protecting young children from sexual abuse. Paper presented at the Conference of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Los Angeles, CA. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 264 686).

Kleemeier, C. & Webb, C. (1986). Evaluation of a school based prevention program. Paper presented at the American Psychological Association Convention, Washington, D.C.

Kleinot, M. C., & Rogers, R. W. (1982). Identifying effective components of alcohol misuse prevention programs. Journal of Studies on Alcohol, 43(7), 802-811.

Krivacska, J. J. (in press). Child sexual abuse prevention programs: What school boards should know. American School Board Journal.

Merrill, M. D., & Tennyson, R. D. (1977). Teaching Concepts: An Instructional Guide. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications.

Miller-Perrin, L. L., & Wurtele, S. K. (1986). Harmful effects of school based sexual abuse prevention programs. Paper presented at the American Psychological Association Convention, Washington, D.C.

Plummer, Carol A. (1986). Prevention education in perspective. In M. Nelson & K. Clark (Eds.). The Educator's Guide to Preventing Child Sexual Abuse (pp. 1-5). Santa Cruz, CA: Network Publications.

Swan, C., Press, A. N., & Briggs, S. L. (1985). Child sexual abuse prevention: Does it work? Child Welfare, 64, 196-205.

Tharinger, D. J., Krivacska, J. J., Laye-McDonough, M., Jamison, L., Vincent, G. G., & Hedlund, A. D. (1988). Prevention of child sexual abuse: An analysis of issues, educational programs and research findings. School Psychology Review, 17(4), 614-634.

Tharinger, D. J., & Krivacska, J. J. (April, 1988). Child sexual abuse prevention programs: The role of school psychologists. Paper presented at the National Association of School Psychologists Conference, Chicago, Ill.

Wolfe, D. A., MacPherson, T., Blount, R., & Wolfe, V. V. (1986). Evaluation of brief interventions for educating school children in awareness of physical and sexual abuse. Child Abuse & Neglect, 10, 85-92.

Dr. Krivacska received his doctorate in school psychology from the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology - Rutgers University, in 1984. Currently practicing as a school psychologist, Dr. Krivacska is also a private consultant in program development and evaluation.

Currently, he is collaborating with Dr. Deborah Tharinger of the University of Texas in a review of CSAP programs being used throughout the country. Dr. Krivacska is also the Legislative Committee Chair of the New Jersey Association of School Psychologists, a field supervisor for GSAPP-Rutgers and the author of ***THE IEP PLANNER SYSTEM: A compendium of educational and behavioral goals and objectives.***